

SEAL OF ETERNITY



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SHOAH: AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE HOLOCAUST (The complete text of the film) by *Claude Lanzmann*, Pantheon Books, 200 pages, \$15.95

HATE ON TRIAL: THE ZUNDEL AFFAIR, THE MEDIA, AND PUBLIC OPINION IN CANADA by *Gabriel Weimann and Conrad Winn*, Mosaic Press, 201 pages, \$12.95

THE HOLOCAUST: THE NAZI DESTRUCTION OF EUROPE'S JEWS by *Gerhard Schoenberger*, translated by *Susan Sweet*, Hurtig Publishers, 224 pages, \$12.95

THE HOLOCAUST: THE JEWISH TRAGEDY by *Martin Gilbert*, Collins, 959 pages, \$36.95

LET us remind ourselves what the Nazi machine sounded like. Here is Rudolf Hess, the commandant of Auschwitz: "I visited Treblinka to find out how they carried out their extermination. The camp commandant at Treblinka told me that he had liquidated 80,000 in the course of one half-year. He was principally concerned with liquidating all the Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto. He used monoxide gas and I did not think that his methods were very efficient. So when I set up the extermination building at Auschwitz, I used Cyclone B, which was a crystallized prussic acid which we dropped into the death chamber from a small opening. It took from three to 15 minutes to kill the people in the death chamber, depending upon climatic conditions. We knew when the people were dead because their screaming stopped."

Six million Jewish men, women, and children lost their lives in the unprecedented explosion of evil that blackened our world from 1933 to 1945. Though the monster's head was cut off, four decades later its tentacles still reach out. They take the form of neo-Nazi apologists, so-called "revisionists" who deny the reality of the Holocaust and spread their hatred and lies throughout the world.

However, *magna est veritas, et praevallet*. Great is truth, and it prevails. The books and films discussed below are the products of scholars and artists who form a new vanguard. Their shields of truth shall protect us against those who would corrupt history. These works are very different from one another. Each has its own special purpose and vision. But in their search for understanding, and in their insistence that we take responsibility for our actions, they are inextricably linked.

Dark Lullabies, a compelling NFB documentary film that explores the impact of the Holocaust on both Jews and Germans born after the war, was first screened at the 1985 world film festival in Montreal. By the time it reached Toronto in November, its reputation was such that a thousand people (an additional 200 had to be turned away) crowded into the Bloor Cinema to see the film and to meet its directors, Irene Lilienheim Angelico and Abbey Jack Neidik.

"Cinema is like an X-ray session where you really see what's inside the director," observed Roman Polanski. In *Dark Lullabies*, it is the courage and integrity of Angelico and Neidik that the audience sees and reacts to. The moral potency of *Dark Lullabies* awakens our sleeping conscience and renders the film unforgettable.

Irene Angelico is a child of Holocaust survivors. Although her parents did not speak to her about their past, "somehow the knowledge was passed on ... I incorporated their experience as my own." When, in later years, Angelico's father gave her a manuscript in which he described his five-year ordeal in a Nazi concentration camp, it ignited in her a driving need to confront the past. "I asked, how could it happen? I asked, why didn't anybody do anything to stop it? I asked, what am I in relation to the child of someone who committed these atrocities?" These questions started Angelico on her search for truth. *Dark Lullabies* is the chronicle of that odyssey.

Angelico had ventured but a few steps when she discovered that she was not alone. Many other children of survivors were, in their 20s and 30s, also searching, "a generation possessed by a history in which we played no part." Angelico attended a conference in Montreal for the children of survivors and journeyed to Israel for the first world gathering of Jewish Holocaust survivors. Finally, after much soul-searching, she decided she had to go back to

"the source" – to Germany, where she would seek out some of her German contemporaries, including the children of Nazis.

Angelico's interviews with her Jewish and German contemporaries are probing and relentlessly honest – and, therefore, painful. Says one child of a survivor: "I was wondering how in my own way I could take my mother's number off her left hand and have it put back on my hand." Angelico's contact with Germans is just as wrenching, maybe more so, for we are seeing the world through Angelico's eyes. We experience for ourselves Angelico's rush of confusing, almost hallucinatory emotions. "It was morning when I first arrived in Germany. Soccer fans were going to a game somewhere. Commuters were making their way to work. Every gesture and every stance seemed to take on a significance. Who were these people? Had that older man been a Nazi during the war? I couldn't help thinking that if I'd been here 40 years ago, my train would not have stopped here."

Dark Lullabies is one woman's search for some understanding of what may be, finally, beyond our understanding. But this search, this film, is not an exercise in futility. Perhaps the meaning, the truth, lies in the search itself. *Dark Lullabies* has, as its core, the exploration and affirmation of the deep moral potency of the human heart.

"*Shoah* is not an easy film to talk about," wrote Simone de Beauvoir after viewing its premiere in Paris last year. "There is a magic in this film that defies explanation. After the war we read masses of accounts of the ghettos and the extermination camps, and we were devastated. But when, today, we see Claude Lanzmann's extraordinary film, we realize we have understood nothing. In spite of everything we knew, the ghastly experience remained remote from us. Now, for the first time, we live it in our minds, hearts and flesh. It becomes our experience."

Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust is the complete text of the 9½-hour film. One might think that the text alone could not possibly convey the magic of the film, its mesmerizing combination of beauty and horror. That it does do this, and something more, Claude Lanzmann himself realized: "Incredulous, I read and reread this naked and bloodless text. A strange force seems to have filled it through and through; it resists, it lives its own life." Cut away from the film, breathing on their own, the words pass from the inessential to the essential; they achieve, says Lanzmann, "another status, another dignity, as it were, a seal of eternity."

Try as they did, the Nazis could not obliterate all traces of their most heinous crime, the crime that Churchill called "the most bestial, the most squalid and the most senseless of all their offenses."

They could not stop the human mind from remembering. In *Shoah*, Lanzmann reignites the memories of witnesses. And they come forward, Jews, Germans, Poles and others, to tell their stories.

These memories stamp the Holocaust with the "seal of eternity." Lanzmann's great purpose – it is the purpose and accomplishment of all serious Holocaust scholars and artists – is to ensure the continuance of these memories, to keep the story alive, to keep the image kindled so that it burns like an eternal flame in humankind's collective conscience. When the original witnesses die, we take their place. That is our responsibility and our sacred duty. "I will give them an everlasting name" – Isaiah 56:5.

There are those who would erase the everlasting name. They are doing everything they can (and they are capable of anything) to extinguish the flame of memory and truth. In the United States, Willis A. Carto, a one-time organizer for the John Birch Society, created the Institute for Historical Review, the leading source of Holocaust denial literature. In Canada, Ernst Zundel, the country's most notorious anti-Semite, was for many years North America's leading publisher of hate propaganda. At the time of his trial in 1984 his material was being distributed in at least 50 countries and translated into 15 languages.

Hate on Trial: The Zundel Affair, the Media, and Public Opinion in Canada is an eye-opening look at Canadian society in the 1980s. Authors Gabriel Weimann, a senior lecturer in sociology at Haifa University in Israel, and Conrad Winn, a professor of political science at Carleton University, ambitiously tackle such challenging questions as: Was it right to charge Zundel? Did the trial increase anti-Semitism in Canada? Did it raise doubt about the Holocaust? How influential is the media? Did it pay too much attention to the trial? Who listened? How extensive is anti-Semitism? In what parts of the country and amongst what sort of people and religious groups is it a problem?

The authors' answers to these questions are based on the findings of a specially designed national public-opinion poll. Among the book's most important conclusions is that, contrary to the alarmist view that the Zundel trial would make Canadians susceptible to Holocaust denial propaganda, the trial and its extensive media coverage actually increased public understanding of the Holocaust and intensified sympathy for the Jews. On the negative side, however, the survey also revealed that anti-Jewish prejudice and admitted ignorance of Jewish issues are serious problems in Canada, and were serious problems before the trial of Ernst Zundel. The poll indicated that only 63 per cent of Canadians are entirely free of anti-Jewish prejudice.

It is especially depressing to note that our young